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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Twentieth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 511st MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 14 January 1999, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Miss MASON

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CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (continued)

Initial report of Belize

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GE.99-40161 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of Belize [(CRC/C/3/Add.46); list of issues (CRC/C/Q/BELI/1); written replies of the Government of Belize to the questions raised in the list of issues]

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Mrs. Baldenamos Garcia, Mr. Dakers, Mrs. Shoman, Mr. Martinez and Mr. Tamer (Belize) took places at the Committee table.

2. The CHAIRPERSON welcomed the Belizean delegation and invited it to present the initial report of Belize (CRC/C/3/Add.46).

3. Mrs. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that Belize was in the first group of countries that had signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. Between 1991 and 1998 Belize's level of compliance with the articles of the Convention could be described as fairly successful. The main areas of success included a relatively high percentage of child immunization, provision of potable water in urban and rural settings, high accessibility to primary education for children of school age and the enactment of a comprehensive Families and Children Act with provisions dealing with the rights of the child, legal capacity, guardianship and custody of children, children in care, maintenance of children and paternity. The Belizean authorities were nonetheless mindful of the commitments they had been unable to fulfil fully or in part, namely, the relatively high primary school drop-out rate; the inadequacy of sanitary facilities in rural areas; the high incidence of HIV/AIDS cases; the need for the appointment of a children's Ombudsperson; the relatively high incidence of malnutrition among children up to the age of five; and the need for the establishment of a centralized database for the collection and analysis of data relating to specific children's issues.

4. Although Belize's level of compliance with the Convention was encouraging when compared to most of its Central American and even some of its Caribbean neighbours, the Government did not intend to be complacent and the Ministry of Human Resources had been given a mandate to protect the rights, well-being and best interests of all children in Belize. It was the Ministry's intention to comply fully with all commitments under the Convention by the year 2000.

5. Mr. FULCI welcomed the frank approach reflected in the report concerning the extent of Belize's compliance with its obligations as a State party to the Convention. The first question he wished to ask concerned the fact that Belize had not ratified two major human rights instruments, namely, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Did Belize intend to make good that omission? He also wished to know more about collaboration between Belize and other Caribbean countries. In conclusion, he stressed the importance of creating a central database, which was a prerequisite for any practical and effective action to ensure greater respect for children's rights.

6. Mrs. PALME congratulated the Belizean authorities on their evident commitment to implementing the Convention and strongly urged them to set up a central monitoring mechanism. It would seem that in Belize there were marked differences between various population groups, notably with regard to the mortality rate. Moreover, she pointed out that, in ratifying the Convention, the State party had undertaken to incorporate its provisions fully into its legislative system rather than select particular provisions in the light of the country's circumstances, as the last sentence of the reply to question 2 seemed to imply.

7. Mrs. MOKHUANE also urged Belize to ratify the two human rights instruments mentioned by Mr. Fulci. While Belize had in a short while made enormous progress in implementing the provisions of the Convention, she requested an explanation of the obstacles the country had encountered prior to 1996 in implementing the National Plan of Action for Children adopted in 1994. Could the Belizean delegation be more explicit on the subject? She also asked who was responsible for teacher training in Belize.

8. Mrs. SARDENBERG noted that the high level of the delegation sent by the Belizean Government was proof of the importance it attached to the rights of the child. She too stressed how important it was for Belize to accede to the two aforementioned human rights instruments, since the rights of the child fell within the broad framework of human rights, all of which were interdependent. Given the brevity of the reply to question 3, she wished to know whether the Belizean Government intended to ratify those two instruments.

9. Paying tribute to the quality of Belize's initial report, she asked whether segments of society had been involved in its preparation and whether preparatory meetings or seminars had been held for the purpose. She was pleased to see that the Belizean delegation was headed by a woman and asked what proportion of women held posts in government bodies. Also, had a global children's strategy been defined under the Department of Human Development? Moreover, exactly how was the timetable for the reforms mentioned in the introduction to the report implemented?

10. Mrs. KARP asked what budget and staff were available to the National Committee for Families and Children, how it was organized, to what extent NGOs were represented on it and how it functioned at the local level. Moreover, she requested the Belizean delegation to explain why no thought had been given to establishing ombudsman posts and, in the absence of independent child protection bodies, how complaints lodged by children were dealt with. She also wished to know what specific measures the authorities had envisaged to give effect to the Convention, whether priorities had been set and resources allocated. What did the National Development Plan amount to in budgetary terms, and what exactly did it entail? She would also like to know what time-frame was envisaged for translating the Convention into the country's minority languages.

11. Mr. RABAH asked whether Belize had expressed reservations about the Convention, and if so, for what reasons. Had steps been taken to bring national legislation into line with the provisions of the Convention, and how was the text of the Convention disseminated? Lastly, what activities had been

undertaken by the National Consultative Committee for Children and by the National Council for Families and Children to promote children's participation as mentioned in paragraph 7 of the Government's written replies.

12. Mr. KOLOSOV said that Belize's initial report clearly showed that Belizean society took care of its children but that perhaps more needed to be done before children were perceived as full citizens. For instance, were children's rights to privacy really being respected when they were not authorized to consult a doctor alone before the age of 18? Furthermore, since the Constitution dealt essentially with the rights of persons over 18, Belize might envisage adopting a code that would specifically guarantee children's rights.

13. Mrs. MBOI also welcomed the Belizean authorities' efforts to give effect to the Convention, as by the holding of workshops to make the public aware of its objectives. In that connection, she would like to know which questions had most frequently been raised during the consultations conducted to that end, and what had been the reactions - both positive and negative - of citizens. Since the drafting of the Families and Children Act had apparently involved preparatory consultations, she would like to know whether certain principles embodied in the Convention had been taken into account with a view to their inclusion in the Act.

14. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO asked what was the attitude of Belizean parents to the rights of the child set forth in the Convention, why the National Plan of Action for Children had not been implemented and whether application of the Convention was impeded by budgetary problems.

15. The CHAIRPERSON wished to know what approach had been adopted by the new Government to the rights of the child.

16. Mrs. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that the Belizean Government was perfectly aware that it would be difficult to implement the Convention fully owing to the very limited budgetary resources at its disposal. It would, however, do everything possible to promote the cause of children's rights. For one thing, it would have to introduce HIV/AIDS preventive measures. The infection rate among the Belizean population was one of the highest in Central America. In response to Mrs. Sardenberg, she said that few women went into politics in Belize and that she was the only female minister.

17. Mrs. SHOMAN (Belize) said that Mrs. Balderamos Garcia and she personally had long been militating on behalf of women and children, and had no doubt that the new Government would take very specific measures in that area. The Government was also perfectly aware that it needed to make a speedy examination of the question of Belize's accession to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

18. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that, in preparing the initial report, the Government had realized that the statistical data available on children were quite inadequate. For that reason it had set up a social indicators committee

to gather, in close collaboration with UNICEF, data in various fields, notably health, education and violence within the family, and to publish it in an updated compendium on a regular basis.

19. He recognized that the National Plan of Action for Children, which had originally been drawn up in 1992, had not really been implemented in practice; in 1996, it had been incorporated into the National Plan of Action for Human Development for Belize. That did not mean that nothing had been done for children in recent years. For example, a family services division had been created within the Ministry of Human Resources, and, the National Plan of Action for Human Development contained various programmes on health, education and protection of children's rights.

20. Mrs. SHOMAN (Belize), responding to a concern expressed by Mrs. Palme, said that the "modifications" mentioned on page 7 of the written replies referred to Belize's legal framework, and that the Government had no intention of adopting particular provisions of the Convention and rejecting others.

21. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that the new Government had appointed a member of civil society to head the National Council for Families and Children, which had hitherto been chaired by a representative of the Ministry of Human Resources. That Council comprised representatives of the Government, NGOs, specialized agencies, churches and a number of professions. Its secretariat consisted of an executive secretary and two or three assistants. Until recently it had been financed almost entirely by UNICEF. As UNICEF was gradually reducing its contribution, the Government had undertaken to allocate to the Council the funds it needed to do its work.

22. Mrs. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that it was in a spirit of openness that the Government had entrusted the chairmanship of the National Council for Families and Children to a noted individual of civil society who was extremely competent and very familiar with social problems and reported directly to the Government on the Council's activities. At its first meeting, the Council had been informed that registrars were refusing to record a birth if the mother was unable to produce a receipt showing that she had settled the hospital costs relating to her confinement. That clearly constituted discrimination against poorer women, and measures had immediately been taken by the Council of Ministers to remedy the situation. There were also plans to extend the deadline by which a child's parents or legal representatives must declare the birth and to send registrars to remote areas to obviate the need for disadvantaged persons to make costly journeys.

23. Mrs. SHOMAN (Belize) explained that such measures were called for because without a birth certificate, a child could not be registered in school, obtain a passport or apply for a scholarship. Moreover, the Government had adopted a system of microcredits to enable mothers, especially those bringing up their children alone, to embark on lucrative activities so that they could meet their children's needs.

24. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that the National Council for Families and Children was responsible for familiarizing primary and secondary schoolchildren and society as a whole with the Convention. To that end, the Council had prepared child-oriented teaching materials which took account of

the population's ethnic and cultural diversity. In addition, during the consultations held in connection with the Convention, many parents had expressed the fear of having their parental rights restricted, especially with regard to corporal punishment.

25. Mrs. SHOMAN (Belize) said that, in cases of violence against children, the children themselves could now seek redress before the children's courts, either directly or through NGOs, and especially the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse (NOPCA). The new Government would also see to it that approval was given for funds needed for implementing the law establishing an ombudsperson, which had been adopted under the previous administration. The ombudsperson's main function would be to protect children's rights.

26. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that the National Council for Families and Children comprised representatives of the Government and NGOs. Each of the country's six districts also had a local family and the child office, although at present there was no formal coordination between the National Committee and the local offices. The Committee therefore planned to create a mechanism enabling an elected representative of each office to keep the National Council regularly informed of local developments and provide it with various indicators and statistics.

27. As regards the need for parent education, he mentioned the existence of a programme which was intended to make parents and communities aware of their responsibilities and which received technical and financial assistance from UNICEF. The first stage of the programme had already been implemented in two districts and consisted in making various community leaders aware of the rights of the child so that they in turn could arouse the awareness of the population. Since those leaders were for the most part volunteers, the main problem was to interest them in training. Among other initiatives, the National Human Development Plan, although not aimed specifically at children, covered certain matters that concerned them. There was also a regional initiative, namely, the Lima Accord, which had resulted in a regional plan of action that had in turn given rise to a national plan of action implemented with UNICEF assistance, which he himself had helped devise. That plan of action covered all matters relating to children - education, health, legislation, etc. - and the preparation of the Lima Conference had made it possible to collect all recent data currently available to Belize.

28. Mrs. SHOMAN (Belize) said that the Government had not expressed any reservation to the Convention and that it was firmly determined to bring national legislation into line with both its letter and spirit, although the task of legal reform would be all the more arduous since that aspect had been neglected for very many years. The legislation currently in force would certainly have to be brought up to date, but the law adopted in 1997 on families and children was a promising start. Also, part of the reform would entail using the legislation of other Caribbean countries as a basis for bringing Belizean laws into line with those of neighbouring countries.

29. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that children were able to participate in a wide range of activities. Recently, and for the first time in Belize's history, children had been able to express their views at a consultation as to

which of the rights embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the Child deserved priority. That initiative had been taken with assistance from UNICEF and various governmental and non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, children in most schools, and especially secondary schools, had a say in decisions affecting them.

30. Mrs. SHOMAN (Belize) said that the hardest part of implementing the provisions of the Convention was to change attitudes. For example, although many women occupied positions of responsibility in all sectors, men continued to think that they should "stay at home" and did not do their fair share of domestic chores or in looking after children. Another area in which it would be difficult to change people's mentalities was that of family violence. In that connection, the new Government had undertaken to create within the Police Department a unit specifically responsible for preventing family violence. That unit would not only have to be created but also staffed with persons who were not only professional but also attuned to the problems of women.

31. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) further stated that the drafting of the report had been a good experience in that it had made the Government realize that the task should not be performed by one person; it called, rather, for a collective approach since it constituted an exercise with which society and the NGOs should be associated.

32. Mrs. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize), replying to the Chairperson, said that the new approach consisted not only in helping the disadvantaged, but also in giving them responsibility and helping them to help themselves. It was also necessary to work not only on behalf of children but of all young people. The school drop-out rate, in particular, was alarming, with some 40 per cent of children failing to complete their primary education. The new Minister of Education, who was only 24, was all too aware of the need to provide training for young people - not only academic but vocational and civic as well.

33. Mrs. SARDENBERG was pleased to note that the new Government was determined to meet the challenges it faced, but wished to know more about the specific measures envisaged. For instance, how did Belize intend to cope with budgetary constraints and staff cuts and how did it plan to strengthen international cooperation? She also welcomed the Government's intention to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and urged it to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as well. On the subject of legal reform, she would like to know the main areas in which old laws had been amended to bring them into line with the Convention and how it was planned to enforce the new laws. She would also like to know the results of the opinion poll conducted among children about their rights. Moreover, she wondered whether the text of the Convention had been translated into minority languages - including indigenous languages - other than Spanish. In conclusion, she asked whether the very positive decentralization process undertaken with regard to birth registration had also been embarked upon in other areas.

34. Mrs. MBOI sought clarification of the steps taken to bring domestic laws, and especially the Families and Children Act, into line with the provisions of the Convention. She wondered whether Belize's domestic laws

that set the legal minimum age of marriage at 14 were really in the best interests of the child, and asked what proportion of children married at 14. Moreover, the legal minimum age of criminal responsibility, which was apparently seven, seemed to be extremely low and she would like to know whether the Government had any plans to raise it.

35. She welcomed the idea of organizing a national consultation on family violence in the State party. In that connection, she hoped that the authorities would take due account of the effect of such violence on children, especially later on in their adult lives. She also asked whether, during the consultation, account would be taken of the contribution of health services, which were often the first or even the only ones to be informed of the existence of such violence. She also hoped that both sexes, adults and children, would be polled on an equal footing during the consultation. Lastly, she expressed the hope that any measures taken in the wake of that consultation would deal with treatment and assistance not only for victims of violence but also for the offenders, who should also be able to benefit from protection measures and treatment in order to prevent recidivism.

36. Mrs. PALME strongly urged the Belizean authorities to ensure equality between the sexes in all areas of society. To be sure, progress in that area was necessarily slow, but changes were being made in many countries and Belize should not be the exception.

37. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO also wished to know the results of the opinion poll conducted among children concerning their rights as set forth in the Convention, how the priorities thus established were taken into account and how the preferences expressed by the children were reflected in programmes relating to them. She noted that, according to the report, there were no official channels of communication between the Government and the NGOs and wondered how cooperation with those organizations, which had an important role to play, was achieved. Lastly, she asked whether steps would be taken to disseminate the initial report of Belize and the Committee's concluding observations to all segments of the population, including immigrants and refugees, so that their concerns could be taken into consideration in all measures taken to implement the Convention.

38. Mrs. KARP wondered whether it would not be possible for a representative of the department in the Ministry of Finance responsible for preparing the national budget to sit on the National Council for Families and Children since that would imply a more positive financial commitment by the Government to the protection of children's rights. She too felt that children should be encouraged to participate more actively in the life of society as a whole and that in that connection they should be encouraged to learn from each other about the rights to which they were entitled under the Convention, through the system of peer education, which could be extremely effective.

39. Mr. FULCI said he was deeply concerned by the laws in force in Belize under which a child could not be registered if medical expenses were not paid by parents after a birth. Any State party had the duty to ensure that all children were registered immediately after birth to avert any risk of their being deprived of legal existence. The delegation could perhaps clarify the situation.

40. Mr. KOLOSOV said that, since Belize was a small State in terms of area and population, regional or bilateral cooperation with neighbouring States was certainly important. Belize's initial report made no mention of specific regional agreements to which Belize might be party; he would like more information on the subject, and particularly about the possible existence of agreements that would, for instance, avoid Belizean children being officially registered in third countries.

41. The CHAIRPERSON asked the delegation to specify the areas of the Families and Children Act that the Government intended to amend.

42. Mrs. SHUMAN (Belize) said that the new Families and Children Act was by no means complete or perfect and that there was a great deal still to be done to define and incorporate into a single text all the rights, responsibilities, obligations and duties concerning children and the persons responsible for them. Nevertheless, the new text dealt with as broad as possible a range of questions concerning children and the family (rights of the child, legal capacity, guardianship and maintenance of children, children in care, adoption, etc.) and some of the old laws had been abrogated to be replaced by a single text governing all the rights of the child. Moreover, a new law on domestic violence and another on sexual abuse were being drafted, which meant that many amendments would have to be made to existing legislation, particularly in the area of education and health, in order to bring domestic laws fully into line with the provisions of the Convention. That process had started as long ago as 1992 and was continuing, with legislators making every effort to draft texts that were as complete as possible and adapted to the evolution of society as a whole.

43. The innovations contained in the new law included the provision that non-Belizean nationals henceforth had the right to adopt Belizean children and that the adoption procedure was to be closely monitored by social workers who reported to the competent authorities, independently of lawyers or any ad litem guardians. Hence, everything was being done to ensure the welfare of Belizean children adopted abroad and, in that connection, Belize scrupulously respected the obligations it had contracted when it ratified the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Children Abduction. The new law stated that children had every right to live with their parents if circumstances so permitted. Moreover, access to family courts was facilitated and less formal, so that children should suffer less from the proceedings instituted by their parents which could affect them personally. The other new aspect of the law was the fact that DNA testing was now possible if the need to establish paternity arose.

44. She confirmed that failure to declare a child at birth was an offence punishable by a fine. However, parents initially had the right to 42 days' grace for declaring their child's birth and if, for personal reasons, they were unable to do so after that deadline, they were given an extra year. Also, under the new law, the procedure for issuing placement and supervision orders was speedier since the courts, at the request of the social workers or health care officials, could take rapid decisions concerning children in difficulty. In that connection, attitudes had changed considerably and children's homes were now a great deal more attractive than before and better adapted to the needs of the young persons entrusted to them.

45. Those were some of the main points that served as a basis for the new Families and Children Act, which aimed at providing maximum protection for children's rights and interests in all situations affecting them and bearing in mind specific needs connected with childhood in general.

46. Mrs. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that subsidiary texts would be added to the new legislation, providing in particular for the obligation to report cases of abuse and negligence of which children might be victims, and for the recruitment of social workers and health care officials by the Ministry of Human Resources. Moreover, Mrs. Karp's suggestion that a Ministry of Finance official should be appointed to the National Council for Families and Children seemed entirely justified, as were Mrs. Sardenberg's and Mrs. Mboi's suggestions urging a multisectoral approach to the problem of curbing family violence.

47. Regarding the translation of the text of the Convention into all languages spoken in the country, she said that although various indigenous languages were used in Belize, they were spoken mainly in the home and that, as a general rule, the vernacular was English or Spanish; the text of the Convention was available in both those languages to all segments of the population. Lastly, while Belize's economic indicators, especially its per capita gross national product, were such that the country did not qualify for international aid, poverty persisted and the world community's support was still greatly needed.

48. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that the opinion poll conducted among children concerning the rights conferred on them by the Convention had shown that, for the majority of Belize's children, the top priority was the right to education. The other priority areas varied considerably according to region. In the capital, for example, the main priority was the right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, which was largely explained by the situation in urban areas. In other regions, the priorities were the right to health, to freedom of expression and to a healthy environment.

49. He also indicated that, between 1980 and 1998 expenditure on basic social services, namely, education and health, had increased by 180 per cent for the country as a whole and that, between 1996 and 1998, 20.3 per cent of the national budget had been allocated to those services, despite the serious economic difficulties faced by the country. Lastly, on the subject of official links with NGOs, he said that the Ministry of Human Resources had recently appointed an official to establish contact with those organizations and that the forms of official collaboration could be worked out in the near future. Moreover, as Belize was in the centre of the Central American and Caribbean area, it had signed many regional agreements and took an active interest in all matters affecting the region, including the status of women and children.

50. The CHAIRPERSON thanked the Belizean delegation for its replies to the first part of the list of issues.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.

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GE.99-40169 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of Belize (continued) (CRC/C/3/Add.46; CRC/C/Q/BEL/1)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Belize took places at the Committee table.

2. The CHAIRPERSON invited the members of the Committee to comment on the delegation's earlier remarks and ask questions concerning the definition of the child, general principles and civil rights and freedoms (questions 12 to 17 of the list of issues (CRC/C/Q/BEL/1)).

3. Mrs. SARDENBERG said she would like to know if there were any plans afoot to translate the Convention into Creole so as to cater for the vast majority of Belizeans who spoke neither Spanish nor English. She applauded the establishment of a focal point for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), thereby formalizing a mechanism for strengthening cooperation. She wondered, however, about its relationship to the mandate given to the Ministry of Human Development, Women and Youth to encourage development and rationalization among the NGOs themselves and between them and the Ministry and what contribution the NGOs had made to the preparation of the report.

4. Mrs. PALME said that the age of criminal responsibility was excessively low and should be raised. The age of marriage - based admittedly, on Belizean traditions - was also low and could be detrimental to the best interests of the girl child and, indeed, her health. She urged the Government to consider ways of discouraging early marriage, so as to give children time to develop a mature attitude to that institution.

5. Like Mrs. Sardenberg, she considered discriminatory the fact that children attending schools in remote areas might be denied access to the Convention if they understood neither Spanish nor English.

6. She had noted that, in addition to the 5 per cent official refugee figure, a further 10 per cent of the population consisted of illegal immigrants and included children, who were entitled to similar support. How did the Government of Belize, with its scant resources, plan to provide such support?

7. She wished to know what action the Government envisaged in order to attenuate the problem of absentee fathers - referred to as "visiting partners" - by enlightening them as to their paternal duties and the privileges of fatherhood. She also urged appropriate regulation of the situation of children that were abandoned when their parents went abroad to work or study. In that connection, she observed that adoption laws were in course of preparation and urged Belize to ratify the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, an important instrument for international cooperation among the signatories to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

8. Mrs. MOKHUANE, having commended the Belize authorities on their commitment to applying the provisions of the Convention and on the progress they had made with regard to child legislation, said she was concerned about the brain drain from Belize and wondered what efforts were being made to attract human resources from abroad. Moreover, given the country's limited resources, she wished to know what time frame was envisaged for implementing the proposals still pending and the establishment of a supervisory mechanism.

9. Mr. RABAH sought clarification of the precise types of employment for which legal minimum ages had been established and asked how enforcement of the legislation was monitored. He further inquired whether any children between the ages of 14 and 16 were currently in prison and what alternatives to imprisonment existed.

10. Mrs. KARP said that she, too, deplored the low minimum age for marriage, sexual consent and, in particular, criminal liability at the age of seven. It was not clear from the report whether there was any correlation between the age of deprivation of liberty and that of imprisonment. She wished to know the actual age at which children could be conscripted into the army, since the expression "at the Governor-General's discrimination" used in the initial report was very vague.

11. She stressed the importance of effective legislation so that medical and psychological counselling regarding drugs, sexual matters and AIDS could be given to children without parental involvement and of a monitoring mechanism to ensure that they were not exploited by charlatans. Ways should also be found to encourage children to confide in their parents where that was feasible.

12. In the Committee's view, discrimination transcended the forms actually enumerated in the Convention. Belize should thus concentrate on combating the de facto discrimination arising from unequal access in different parts of the country to the educational and health projects that served to empower children and must devise policies that placed the emphasis where it was most needed.

13. She would like to have some examples of how the courts interpreted the best interests of the child, not only in conflicts between parent and child but also when the child's own interests were in conflict. In that connection, she objected to the use of the word "welfare" in the report, as opposed to the "best interests of the child", which was the language of the Convention. "Welfare" was a somewhat patronizing term that implied mere care and protection, without consideration for the interests of an individual with rights.

14. There was some ambivalence in the new Belizean legislation on children. The proviso that the rights under the Convention would be enjoyed on condition that they accorded with the circumstances of Belize placed too heavy an onus on judges to decide which children's right did so. She therefore suggested that the child legislation be preceded by a general section in which not only children's basic rights but also the principles of the Convention were spelled out.

15. It was important that specific mention be made of the need to heed the wishes of children born out of wedlock as part of the decision-making process concerning them. Judges and care-givers should be urged to impart all relevant information to the child in question, so that he or she could take an informed decision about the future.

16. On the subject of participation, she encouraged the delegation to work towards the representation of children from all strata, the aim of the Convention being the empowerment of all children, regardless of their background.

17. Concerning the right of children to the integrity of their bodies, she regretted that corporal punishment had not been completely forbidden in the schools. Her main concern, however, was with corporal punishment in the home. In its determination to eradicate domestic violence, Belize must realize that that goal would not be attained so long as society justified the abuse of power and tolerated violence against children. The Committee felt that corporal punishment both in the home and at school violated many specific articles of the Convention as well as its general principles.

18. Most countries had had to overcome the resistance of parents and teachers who contended that corporal punishment was a valuable educational tool and had succeeded in helping such teachers and parents, and the community in general, to seek alternative measures. Belize might wish to seek assistance from countries that had already been successful in that endeavour.

19. Mr. FULCI said he hoped that the incredibly low age of seven for criminal liability would soon be raised. He wondered who was considered capable of judging the maturity of a child of seven or eight.

20. One of the basic general principles of the Convention was non-discrimination. Consequently, since the language of instruction was English in Belize, he wished to know what remedies were provided for the 23 per cent of the population who did not understand or speak that language.

21. In connection with civil rights and freedoms, he recommended an urgent revision of the Aliens Act so as to afford special protection for alien children who were in danger of expulsion or banishment. The Belize authorities should also look into the discrimination encountered by refugees and by the immigrant and indigenous populations, which was inevitably all the more acute in the case of children.

22. Mr. KOLOSOV, having praised the delegation for its high degree of professionalism, referred to a paragraph of the report in which the negative influence of the United States on young people was acknowledged (para. 301) and asked whether Belize was considering any plans to counteract that influence, especially in view of the likely expansion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

23. He also asked whether Belize had any plans to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of the

Child and urged its authorities to inform the Secretary-General of their acceptance of the amendment to the Convention whereby the membership of the Committee would be increased from 10 to 18.

24. Mrs. PALME said that the issue of corporal punishment had to be dealt within all its aspects. Sweden had been the first country to pass a law against it, and the practice had declined every year since, thus showing that the law was being respected. Violence in society as a whole could not be dealt with if there were violence in the family, schools and institutions.

25. With regard to ratification by Belize of ILO Convention No. 138, on the minimum age for access to work, she pointed out that the International Labour Organization was currently drafting a new convention on hazardous work, which was also very important. Many children in Belize were dropping out of school and probably taking up some kind of work, which hindered their development and their future contribution to society.

26. Mrs. MOKHUANE said that the age of marriage for girls and the age of criminal responsibility were not in keeping with the emotional and physical development of the child. A 14-year-old was never ready to act as a woman and run a home and there were many problems in having sex early in life, both gynaecological and AIDS-related. Nor was a seven-year-old really able to distinguish between right and wrong; on the contrary, at that age a child was just beginning to learn to make the distinction.

27. There was also a discrepancy in the State party's intentions vis-à-vis the definition of the child. The Committee was assured in the initial report (para. 31) that the Government was conscious of the need to improve standardization of ages of majority and gender equity, whereas in its written replies to the Committee's questions (document without a symbol), the Government said that it had currently no plans to raise those minimum ages. That discrepancy was a matter of concern.

28. On the issue of non-discrimination, the State party's written replies to the list of issues referred to the steps the Government intended to take to combat school truancy and stated that a truancy programme would address the relatively large number of youth not attending school. She was concerned about the use of the word "truancy"; in cases where children were not in school, it seemed more appropriate to ask whether it was not the adults who were at fault in not supervising their children. Parents should play an active role in both education and upbringing.

29. According to the Government's written replies, a new Disability Act was pending. It would be interesting to hear what the current perceptions were in the community and civil society regarding disabilities. Did the Government have problems accommodating disabled children in the schools?

30. She wondered whether there were any incentives in place to promote the reporting of child abuse. While it was a good idea to have such a law, it could be enforced only if the members of the community were aware of their rights and the possibilities of redress. In the case of child abuse, for example, the question arose what would happen if the police was not sensitive to the issues.

31. Mrs. SARDENBERG asked for some clarification regarding the groups at risk of discrimination, particularly children with disabilities. What steps were being taken pending the adoption of the anti-discrimination act and what progress had been made in drafting it? The Government was attempting to bring children with disabilities into the mainstream, but there also seemed to be some problems of discrimination against, and lack of participation by, children from the Mayan- and Spanish-speaking populations. Children were also the victims of gender differences, girls because of the situation of women in general and boys because some laws on sexual assault did not include any protective measures for them.

32. According to the information received by the Committee, immigrants were also discriminated against, as were children in institutions, and there was alleged to be a certain amount of ethnic tension. The Certified Institutions (Children's Reformation) Act seemed to be in harmony with the Convention, but the report did not specify the duration of institutionalization. She wondered whether the Government had done any work in that regard and whether it had examined the situation of children in institutions to see if they were in fact the object of discrimination.

33. Mrs. OUEDRAOGO said that there was no law to prevent discrimination against the disabled, and she wondered how the Government guaranteed their right to protection against all forms of discrimination. While the initial report stated that traditional and administrative procedures respected the child's views, there was no indication how the Government guaranteed that that right was respected in families, schools and institutions. The report mentioned certain actions taken in relation to children's participation in activities nationwide, but was that right respected in schools and at home?

34. The report acknowledged the need to take steps to respect the child's right to registration at birth (para. 56), but children without a birth certificate could not be registered at school. How, then, were they guaranteed their right to education, particularly if they were living in remote areas or were the children of illegal immigrants?

35. How did the Government guarantee the right of the child to a private life in family, school and institutions? Were there provisions for protecting children against information that could be considered harmful to their moral development or provide exposure to acts of violence? What was being done to reduce the negative impact of certain technological innovations, such as video films and electronic games? Were there any procedures for censorship? Had violence between children been included in the Government's proposals on violence in the family and corporal punishment?

36. Mrs. MBOI said that the promotion and protection of the rights of women went hand in hand with those of children. Paragraph 46 of the report, on the right to life, stated that abortion was unlawful. In such cases, the blame usually fell on the mother, and it was she who was punished, with a possible negative impact on any other children. She wished to know, therefore, what was being done to ensure fair treatment of such women and to ensure the best interests of their other children.

37. What precautions were taken to prevent child abusers from committing any further abuse and what was the role of social workers in that regard? How well paid were such workers, and what recognition did they receive from the Government and the community?

38. The CHAIRPERSON said that the age of criminal liability was a problem throughout the Caribbean and a throwback to its colonial past. She could not understand why the Governments of the region's English-speaking countries retained such an early age, as though it were a life-and-death matter. Instead of dealing with the recurrent antisocial behaviour of young people, they penalized them and introduced them to the criminal justice system at too early an age.

39. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize) said that, while most people in Belize spoke Creole, it was not a written language and translation of the Convention in a written form would be fraught with difficulties. The oral form of Creole, in which the Convention could be taught through such forms as play-acting, radio programmes and lectures to children, was much more useful.

40. Regarding the translation of the Convention into minority languages, a translation into Spanish already existed and a translation into Kek'chi Maya was under way. While Mopan Maya and Kek'chi Maya existed in written form most people were unable to read them, so the same situation applied as in the case of Creole: an oral form would be infinitely more useful. That also held true for the Garifuna and Mennonite communities, most of whom did not read their respective languages.

41. She took full responsibility for the statement in paragraph 30 of the report that "in several instances it may be deemed necessary to amend legislation to remove some apparent discrepancies regarding definitions". If the Attorney-General's Office had no plans to change certain ages, the Ministry of Human Development would exert pressure on it to do so. Draft legislation did exist which proposed that the legal minimum age of liability should be raised to age 10, at least. It was certainly true that some 10-year-olds understood perfectly well the import of what they were doing.

42. In any trial involving a child in the 7-to-12 age group, a voir dire (trial within a trial) was conducted by the judge in order to establish what the child's understanding was before making any ruling as to whether the child had the capacity even to give evidence, much less to stand trial. Judges were very conscious of the limitations of such children, and it was extremely rare for any child under the age of 12 to be tried in the criminal courts rather than the Family Court. In practice, Belizean legislation had not kept in step with the Government's policy and its judicial activism.

43. As to the Marriage Act, which was extremely old, the age of 14 was indeed low. The problem was not, so much, however, of 14-year-olds getting married, but of children of that age engaging in sexual activities and themselves having children. There were very few sectors of society that even believed in legal marriage. The Government was considering new legislation in that regard.

44. The age of sexual consent was addressed in the draft sexual offences act of which she herself and the Minister of Human Development had been the architects, but in which past administrations had taken no action. Molesting a child under the age of 10 was currently punishable by life imprisonment, while, in the case of a child aged between 10 and 12, the punishment was five years only. Furthermore, incest against boys was not actionable, and boy children were therefore discriminated against in that sense. The Ministry of Human Development, Women and Youth was painfully aware of all those problems, and the Minister had a personal stake in remedying them.

45. Mrs. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that Belize was in a unique situation with regard to immigrant, alien and refugee children. It had recently closed its refugee office, which had been opened during the 1980s to deal with the situation of conflict in Central America. That situation had been rectified but the immigrant situation had still not been resolved. The banana industry in the south of the country employed many immigrants, often migrant workers. Belize had a small population, and native Belizeans did not wish to work on the banana plantations.

46. Migrants from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador had children who were Belizean. They tended to be a strain on the social sector, although the Government had succeeded largely in mainstreaming them into the educational system. The challenge was to improve the social services and the education and health sectors so as to pay more attention to the children of immigrants.

47. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that, unlike most of its Central American neighbours, Belize, had allowed migrants to come in and live with the existing population and had not had to set up refugee camps. First-generation Belizean children, who had immersed themselves in the culture and spoke two languages, had been able to assimilate many of their parents' cultural traditions. There was some work still to be done, but over the past 10 years, many of the communities that had originally lived apart from the Belizeans had been integrated into existing communities, their children attending the same schools and using the same health services as the rest of the population.

48. The role of the NGO focal point within the Ministry of Human Development was to ensure that the NGO community had a window of access to the public sector. Prior to the establishment of the post, the NGO community had not always received due recognition of its excellent work, since national plans for development had been the domain of the public sector. It was not the role of the focal point to work on matters related to the Convention. The National Committee on Families and Children (NCFC) already had a fairly strong representation of NGOs, for example, on child abuse, family life, education, churches and business. The focal point post was designed to be more institutional and concerned with programme planning.

49. As to how the Government was reaching out to men in their role as fathers, Belizean men had come a long way, but the situation was still far from ideal, particularly with regard to fathers' responsibilities for their children: more than 75 per cent of the time of the Family Court was spent in dealing with fathers' failure to meet their financial commitments; it was a very serious problem. The Family Services Division of the Ministry of Human Development had done a great deal of work, but needed to cooperate with other

agencies and to look at existing legislation as it related to reciprocity in the case of those jurisdictions, such as the United States, to which some fathers have literally fled, and from which they could not be forced to send support.

50. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that an NGO, the Belize Family Life Association, offered counselling and health care for sexually-active adolescents. The utmost sensitivity was necessary in such matters, since churches of many denominations were very active in Belize and were concerned that moral and ethical values should be observed. The Declaration of Lima on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for instance, contained a binding provision to make condoms readily available, but was phrased in such a way as to take cultural, religious, social and other concerns into account.

51. The situation of disabled children was receiving close attention; increased funding for the Human Development Department of the Ministry of Human Development, Women and Youth was making it possible more fully to identify and meet the needs of disabled children, introduce rehabilitation programmes and integrate children with less-serious disabilities into the educational system.

52. It was unfortunately true that low pay and the arduous nature of work in the social services made it difficult to keep good trained stafi whose experience was particularly valuable in such serious areas as child abuse in the family environment.

53. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that, nonetheless, social workers were currently better trained and better paid than in the past. An associate degree course in social work had been introduced in Belize which, it was hoped, would soon be awarded bachelor degree status. Although new legislation regarding the disabled was not yet on the statute books, their situation was indeed receiving greater attention.

54. NGOs existed to assist persons with visual or auditory disabilities, a Disability Division had been established within the Ministry of Human Development and a Special Education Unit was active both within and outside the educational system. Thought might fruitfully be given to reviving an organization such as the defunct Assembly of Persons with Disabilities, given that much was to be gained by pooling efforts.

55. Since the initial report of Belize had been submitted, considerable progress had been achieved in the treatment of young offenders. A new institution had been introduced to house first-time and juvenile offenders and thus ensure that they did not come into contact with hardened criminals. While the probation system, which had been in existence since the 1930s, had had a chequered history, it was currently being rendered more effective with the assistance of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). An expert in the field was introducing a scheme whereby young offenders carried out community service under supervision, as an alternative to confinement. A parole system had also been introduced, in keeping with the philosophy of seeking as far as possible to rehabilitate offenders within the community.

56. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize) said that Belize had not considered it necessary to accede to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption since the national legislation prohibited adoption outside Belize. The entire question did, however, require urgent review. The Labour Act laid down strict age limits for the employment of young people, for which situations of national emergency constituted the sole exception. The participation of children in family-run agricultural, commercial or fishing activities was clearly defined, but the regulations were difficult to enforce.

57. Responding to Mrs. Karp's reservations regarding the term welfare, she said that Schedule 1 of the new Act accommodated not only children's best interests but also their wishes, feelings, needs and the potential effect of action. The emphasis on, for instance, taking children's views properly into account was demonstrated by the fact that every social welfare report must include interviews with the child involved, which were conducted in camera where appropriate.

58. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that high rates of truancy had long been a concern in Belize. While the Ministry of Human Development was not directly responsible for such matters, the fact that children frequently engaged in street-vending activities when they ought to be in school meant that the Ministry's social workers were frequently cast in the role of truancy officers. Many families were dependent on the income earned by children through such activities and the solution thus lay in finding alternative ways of boosting the family income and in persuading parents of the increasing importance of education.

59. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) emphasized the importance of counselling and of communication, not only with parents but also with members of the extended family, particularly in the case of parents working abroad for long periods.

60. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize), replying to Mr. Kolosov's concerns, said that there were absolutely no obstacles to freedom of information since even the most modest homes had access to 64 different cable television channels from the United States of America and Mexico. However, as a result, children were frequently exposed to unsuitable programmes and a danger existed that the national identity might be undermined through the insidious influence of foreign programmes. The Government was aware of the problem and the situation was under review by the Ministry of Culture which was considering ways of increasing national programming.

61. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that, although required to do so by law, people were reluctant to report cases of child abuse. However, the hotline established by the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse, which was confidential in nature and manned by trained counsellors, had proved effective. In the past, people had also been discouraged by the insensitivity of police officers to such situations, for which reason a unit should be created within the Police Department staffed by officers with specialized training. Doctors had also been reluctant in the past to reflect the true extent of abuse in their medical reports and should be made aware that documented medical information was crucial if child abuse cases were to be successfully prosecuted.

62. The duration of a young person's stay in an institutional facility varied from one case to the next. The Ministry of Human Development, which was responsible for monitoring all such institutions, in both the public and private sectors, encouraged the earliest possible reunification with the family or placement with a foster or adoption family. Although the law was flexible, young people did not generally remain in such institutions beyond 16 or 17 years of age.

63. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize) said that, while there were grounds for concern regarding the fact that the duration of placement in an institutional facility was not specified, it was essential that the counselling process should be completed and it was not possible to anticipate how long that might take for individual children.

64. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that attention must also be paid to the child abuser, who was often waiting at home for the victim to return. The Department of Human Development had taken measures to provide counselling to such persons; the criminal legislation should also be reformed.

65. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize) said that the Ministry of Human Development envisaged invoking the Domestic Violence Act to create more programmes that would provide compulsory counselling to abusers.

66. The CHAIRPERSON invited the members of the Committee to ask questions regarding family environment and alternative care, basic health and welfare, and education, leisure and cultural activities.

67. Mrs. KARP said she noted that paragraph 28 of the initial report indicated that the legal minimum age for full-time employment was 14, and, for deprivation of liberty, 7. Clarifications would thus be welcome. She was pleased to learn that counselling was being provided to abusers. Belize might consider the use of behavioural therapy in combination with removal from the home; the desire to return home had been shown to be an incentive for change.

68. She said that the term "best interests of the child", which indicated protection and care combined with rights, was seen as having a broader scope than the term "welfare". That was therefore the term preferred by the Committee.

69. Mrs. MOKHUANE, noting that the legal minimum wage for hazardous employment was 14, inquired what measures, if any, had been taken to protect children engaged in such work. Furthermore, it would be preferable to use the term "children in difficult circumstances" rather than the term "truant", the situation being seen as a reaction to a set of circumstances rather than as meriting a behavioural label.

70. Mrs. PALME inquired whether studies had been conducted to determine how many Belizean mothers breastfed their babies. Reports showed that young children suffered from nutritional deficiencies, a problem that was often associated with the absence of breastfeeding, and that the child mortality rate was high. Commendably, Belize was participating in the UNICEF initiative to create baby-friendly hospitals, among the purposes of which was to encourage mothers to breastfeed their children. According to the World Health

Organization (WHO), Belize had a large number of nurses in comparison with other Latin American countries, although their numbers varied from region to region; they might perhaps be put to better use.

71. Interestingly, the report revealed that the school drop-out rate was high, a phenomenon also generally linked with the presence of malnutrition. Belize, which had a high rate of HIV infection, was also promoting educational programmes in reproductive health. Lastly, WHO was according significant attention to the development of an adolescent health support system, an initiative which could prove helpful to Belize.

72. Mrs. SARDENBERG asked what steps the Government was taking to cooperate with NGOs in the prevention and treatment of child abuse. It would also be useful to know whether bullying in schools was a problem, since it was a phenomenon often associated with corporal punishment and with a culture of violence in general. Had the Government developed mechanisms to address the problems of children with disabilities?

73. In the view of the Committee, it was not advisable to provide set terms for the institutionalization of children: article 25 of the Convention provided for periodic reviews of their treatment and placement. What was the main thrust of the Community and Parent Empowerment Project, discussed on page 17 of the written replies? Page 18 of the written replies stated that Belize was considering the establishment of a reciprocal international agreement on Maintenance Orders, and was, in that regard, contemplating adherence to the 1993 Hague Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Decisions Relating to Maintenance Obligations. What stage had those deliberations reached?

74. Mr. FULCI, noting the high mortality rate among children under the age of five, said he had been surprised to find that there was no data available on the impact of oral rehydration therapy (ORT), a simple and inexpensive therapy which diminished the effects of malnutrition, prevented stunting, and saved lives. Incidentally, pharmaceutical companies were peddling much more complex, expensive and painful methods of achieving the same ends. Why did the report contain no mention of ORT?

75. Mrs. KARP, having asked what measures, if any, had been adopted to prohibit corporal punishment, said that, according to the initial report, the Government of Belize had put a great deal of effort into monitoring the formal adoption process. Since that was so, its permissive approach to the growing practice of informal adoption was most surprising. It should give serious consideration to conducting studies to assess the impact of informal adoption on children.

76. Had the Government developed a comprehensive strategy for coping with HIV/AIDS? The previous year, the Committee had held a day of discussion on how countries might best cope with that pandemic; its deliberations might prove useful to Belize. It would also be useful to know what measures had been taken to combat the high rate of child pregnancy and whether abortion was permitted in Belize. How were pregnant girls treated by society? Were they required to leave school? What services were available to assist them?

77. Turning to the matter of child abuse, she said that the relevant legislation should be amended in order to provide assistance to the victim throughout the legal process, including, inter alia, the use of investigators with psychological training in the treatment of child victims, and special protection techniques like the use of video monitors for the presentation of testimony.

78. Mrs. MBOI said that the practice of informal adoption was common in many countries, including her own. She agreed that studies should be conducted to assess the well-being of informally adopted children, with a view to developing measures to protect their welfare and promote their rights.

79. The Government of Belize had made commendable progress in the area of health but many grave problems still remained. It was interesting to note, for example, that malnutrition was more common among male children than among female children. Studies should be undertaken with a view to developing a comprehensive nutritional policy that would address the needs of special groups.

80. Although the initial report cited a number of significant adolescent health problems, including HIV infection and substance abuse, it had neglected to mention suicide, which, according to WHO, was especially high in girls between the ages of 11 and 21. Had any research been carried out to determine the reason? Apparently about half of all deaths of children between the ages of 5 and 19 were attributable to external causes; what measures, if any, had been undertaken to prevent such deaths?

81. The statistics also indicated that adolescents were suffering from many problems related to their sexuality. They were serious but preventable problems. Had the Government of Belize considered engaging the active participation of religious leaders in the effort to reduce morbidity and mortality in children? In many countries, a pregnant girl was suspended from school, but the boy who had fathered the child was permitted to continue his studies. Belize should contemplate prohibiting that practice. In any event, it was clear that priority must be given to health programmes and services for adolescents.

82. Mrs. PALME said that UNICEF had recently emphasized the importance of early intellectual stimulation for children. There were, however, few day-care centres and pre-school programmes in Belize. The Government should, perhaps, consider the possibility of requesting the churches to set up cultural groups for young parents, an inexpensive but effective means of promoting child development, disseminating health information, and encouraging the participation of fathers. Nurses might also be asked to assist in the creation of parents' groups, and to provide them with health-related information.

83. The CHAIRPERSON said that misbehaviour by male youths was a significant problem throughout the Caribbean region. Had the Government of Belize sponsored any research into the relationship between violence in the family and the problems of boys in society?

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.

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Twentieth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 513th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 15 January 1999, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Miss MASON

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CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (continued)

Initial report of Belize (continued)

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GE.99-40173 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS BY STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of Belize (continued) [CRC/C/3/Add.46; CRC/C/Q/BELI.1 (List of Issues); written replies by the Government of Belize to the questions on the List of Issues (document without a symbol distributed in the meeting room, in English only)]

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Belize resumed their places at the Committee table.

2. Mrs. MOKHUANE said it was her understanding that evaluation visits to children's placement centres were only conducted in certain cases. It seemed there were no visits when children had been placed with their consent for psychiatric reasons; she would like to know why. The high suicide rate among young people, especially girls, was largely due to family problems, and she asked whether specific programmes had been set up to resolve them. She inquired about the methods used by young people to commit suicide and asked whether they had access to firearms. She was also concerned by early pregnancies and their consequences for the schooling of teenage girls, and asked whether there were studies and programmes concerning contraception for young people and whether the Government intended to take measures to prevent pregnant girls from being excluded from the educational system.

3. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that the latest figures available, which had been collected at the Lima Conference, indicated that slightly less than 50 per cent of infants under the age of three months were breastfed, but as the surveys which had produced those figures had been based on samples with low representativity, the actual figures were probably much higher. Prior to 1991, a very active NGO, Breast is Best, had been instrumental in attaining figures in the order of 75 to 80 per cent, but it had had to stop work for lack of financing and the promotion of maternal breastfeeding had become the responsibility of the Government, which required funds to carry out a comprehensive study. Despite the efforts made, none of Belize's hospitals met the conditions required to be labelled a "Baby-Friendly Hospital", although one was quite close. An up-to-date and comprehensive study on the incidence of HIV/AIDS among young people was also badly needed. According to the figures gathered for the Lima Conference, from 1986 to 1996 494 persons had contracted HIV and 196 persons had contracted AIDS. Most were in the 15-34 year age group. A multisectoral working group was currently working on a policy to combat HIV/AIDS, on the basis of opinions sought from different population groups. According to a 1993 study, less than half of sexually active women used contraception.

4. The UNICEF-sponsored project on education for parents and society was intended to raise awareness of children's rights not only by parents, but by other key figures of society who would in turn raise the awareness of the rest of the population. The project had first been launched among the rural communities in the Belize district and had recently been extended to the most disadvantaged district in the country, Toledo.

5. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize), replying to a question on paragraph 28 of the report, said that working children were exceptions to the rule whereby child labour was prohibited. The Government was aware of problems regarding recovery of maintenance, which was particularly difficult when the parent responsible for maintenance left the country, and of the need to ratify the 1973 Hague Convention on the recognition and enforcement of decisions relating to maintenance obligations. However, the Families and Children Act was a step in the right direction. Maintenance had been limited to US$25 per week prior to the Act, and the non-payment of such a modest sum had not been sufficient to justify bringing charges. The amount of maintenance to be paid was now set in terms of parents' means and obligations.

6. Concerning early pregnancies, since the 1970s one of the principal Catholic establishments had been arranging for young women to resume their studies after having a baby, but it was still the only one to do so. Teenage girls who had had babies were generally considered to have become adults, and they were offered vocational training rather than the possibility of resuming their studies. The Ministry of Education was working to improve that situation. No customary practices harmful to children other than corporal punishment existed in Belize. Informal adoption, on the other hand, was part of the culture of Belize, like other Caribbean countries, and financing was needed to begin studies on that question.

7. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) denied that there was a high suicide rate among girls in Belize. That might have been so at the time the report was drafted, but suicide was no longer a major problem. Concerning nutrition, he again regretted the lack of recent data. The latest information available dated from 1991. At the time, 44 per cent of children suffering from diarrhoea had been receiving oral rehydration therapy. The situation had doubtless changed over the years, and a comprehensive study was needed. The Ministry of Health had contacted the Statistics Department to that end, but resources were lacking. It was reported that 15.4 per cent of children had retarded growth. The children most severely affected generally lived in the Toledo district, rural areas and Maya communities. Malnutrition reportedly affected 30 per cent of all children, and obesity 15 per cent. Concerning pre-school education, he said that day care and nursery school coverage had unfortunately dropped from 30.9 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 1996. The austerity measures had forced the State to privatize nearly all State-run establishments, and many had closed as a result. The children's poor preparation at the pre-school level had brought about a rise in the repeat rate at the first-grade level, a problem which needed to be resolved. With regard to raising religious leaders' awareness of health issues affecting young people, some recommended practices did at times create friction, but the Church did not put up a strong resistance on the whole. Regarding violence, he cited the establishment of a special unit within the Ministry of Human Development to deal with violence in the family. There was also an urban violence problem due to rival gangs, imported from the United States. A programme established three or four years earlier to provide young unemployed people with basic knowledge and vocational skills had yielded encouraging results, but a comprehensive study was still needed.

8. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that despite the drop-out rate due to early pregnancies, girls remained in the majority in the educational

system. For example, 65 per cent of university students were female. There were more young men loafing in the streets than studying at university. For that reason a centre had been established specifically to provide teenage boys with elementary education and basic vocational skills.

9. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize), replying to a question by Mr. Kolosov, explained that young Belizeans who were deeply attached to firearms were often the children of Belizeans who had emigrated to the United States. Unable to deal with their sudden material prosperity, far away from their cultural roots, such young people joined armed gangs in an attempt to provide themselves with a semblance of family. When they became undesirable in the United States, they were expelled to Belize, where they reproduced those patterns of violence. That was a serious problem which required a multidisciplinary approach: educational, hygiene-oriented, cultural, economic and financial.

10. Replying to a question by Ms. Karp, she said that until relatively recently, the names of child victims of sexual abuse had been published in the newspapers. That practice, which had been sharply criticized by the NGOs, was now prohibited by the Domestic Violence Act. The courts unfortunately did not have the technology to enable children to testify outside the room where the proceedings were taking place. Thus, child victims of sexual abuse were all too often brought face to face with their torturers, which explained why some parents preferred not to place their children in such situations. The authorities were aware of the need for a change in that area.

11. Mr. DAKERS (Belize), replying to a question about assistance for abused children, referred to the Family Services Division, a team of social workers within the Ministry of Human Development in charge of resolving problems of domestic violence and child abuse. NGOs, in particular the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse, were also active in that area. Thus structures did exist, although their scope and quality were unfortunately still insufficient, especially in the rural areas. Staff training had been improved, but the Government would continue its efforts. With regard to the treatments available for children suffering from psychiatric problems, the number of certified psychiatrists and psychologists was admittedly seriously insufficient. The training involved consisted of a lengthy university course, and the remuneration which specialists received did not provide them with a sufficient incentive to practise in the country.

12. Replying to a question concerning the use of contraceptive methods by Belizean adolescents, he said that statistics indicated widespread use of contraception, even among children with religious backgrounds. However, there was a high adolescent pregnancy rate, and the Government would have to raise awareness among young people, both male and female, of the difficulties which early pregnancies presented.

13. The CHAIRPERSON invited the members of the Committee who so wished to put any final questions to the delegation.

14. Mr. FULCI thanked the members of the delegation for their thorough and detailed replies. Mindful of the need for high-quality education for children, the Committee was deeply concerned at the problems of malnutrition, overcrowding, absenteeism and lack of textbooks and classrooms with which

Belize seemed to be struggling. What exactly was the situation? Was the Government aware of the importance of education to the country's future?

15. The authorities acknowledged that greater efforts must be made to enforce the provisions of the Labour Act concerning child labour more fully (report, para. 294). In that connection, he inquired whether they had considered ratifying ILO Convention No. 138 concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment.

16. Ms. SARDENBERG said that the authorities should give high priority to all education-related issues, as the school environment provided the ideal context for preparing children for adult life and teaching them the principles set forth in the Convention. Given the lack of recreational, cultural and sports facilities, the Committee recommended that Belize should consider intensifying its cooperation with UNESCO. By improving the quality of education and learning materials, the authorities would be taking a major step towards resolving other problems faced by young people.

17. She asked whether sexual tourism was practised in Belize. Were there labour inspection mechanisms, and what had been the results of the survey on child labour in Belize conducted in cooperation with ILO? What were the results of the technical cooperation programmes established with the Centre for Human Rights and the projects undertaken in cooperation with UNICEF?

18. Ms. OUEDRAOGO noted that the right to education was the principle which had received the most votes in a children's vote on the provisions of the Convention, and asked what measures had been considered to address that concern. Education in Belize was not really free; parents of primary- and secondary-school children still had to buy school supplies, and some schools even asked for a contribution towards school fees. How did the Government ensure that children from disadvantaged families received an education, especially at the primary level, and how did it prevent children from dropping out of school? As in numerous developing countries, many children were not enrolled in the school system, despite the existence of legislation on compulsory education. Was there a programme for the education of children under 14 years of age? In any event, closer cooperation with UNESCO would certainly help the Government of Belize to improve educational conditions in the country.

19. She asked whether the authorities had considered exchanging experience with other countries which had managed to resolve the problem of overcrowded classes. With regard to religious instruction, which was virtually compulsory, she asked what steps had been taken to give effect to the rights laid down in article 14 of the Convention on freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

20. How did the educational system provide for the child's participation in the decision-making process? How was the child's opinion taken into consideration within the family? Did the schools involve parents in decisions concerning their children?

21. The Committee was concerned at the fact that the Ministry of Education's School Rules provided for corporal punishment as a last resort and in a way

that would not cause bodily harm to the student. That limit was very difficult to respect, and she urged the authorities to take the necessary steps, in the framework of the programme to combat violence, to abolish corporal punishment in the schools.

22. Mr. RABAH asked whether street children were assisted by government agencies or by NGOs.

23. There was a contradiction between the legislation on juvenile offenders, which stipulated that people under 16 years of age were to be kept apart from adult offenders except when jointly charged with adult offenders [report, para. 272 (b)], and the obligation to ensure confidentiality of the trial. How were juvenile offenders in police custody or detention treated? The Committee would like to know whether there were special institutions for them, what types of sentences minors served and whether alternative sentences were possible. Were educational and social services available in the prisons and specialized institutions?

24. Referring to paragraph 276 of the report, he asked how the courts fulfilled their obligation to obtain information concerning the juvenile's conduct, home life, school records and medical history, who was responsible for collecting that information and what type of training they had received.

25. Ms. PALME asked whether the authorities exercised supervision over refugee children working on the banana plantations. She joined other speakers in recommending that the authorities should ratify ILO Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment.

26. She asked whether the Belize authorities were cooperating with neighbouring countries to eradicate child sex abuse and trafficking in children and whether the policies they designed to that end took into account the Agenda for Action of the World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held at Stockholm in 1996.

27. The report stated that the infant mortality and maternal mortality rates were very high in the regions with indigenous minorities. It would be interesting to know what the Government was doing to correct that situation and whether it was considering cooperating with UNICEF to bring down those rates.

28. Mr. KOLOSOV noted that paragraph 311 of the report stated that the minimum age for national service should ideally be set at 18 years, but at the very least at 16 years. He strongly encouraged Belize to set the age at 18 years rather than 16. He would also like to know whether young Belizeans served in the armies of neighbouring countries.

29. Ms. KARP asked, in connection with the campaign against HIV/AIDS, whether there were sex education classes in the schools, whether the students were screened for AIDS and who cared for children whose parents had died of AIDS.

30. Regarding juvenile offenders, it would be useful to know whether the Government was considering raising the age of criminal liability, whether

there was a correlation between the school drop-out rate and juvenile delinquency, how many minors were currently in detention and whether they were entitled to free legal assistance. It was unfair for the time spent by a juvenile offender in a certified institution to be longer than the sentence he would have served in prison. Lastly, there should be a law prohibiting corporal punishment in the family and the schools and a campaign against such practices should be organized.

31. Ms. MOKHUANE asked why some parents of intellectually hindered children did not send their children to the establishments provided for them, whether the early stimulation and rehabilitation services in the home which were available for children with developmental delays were effective, whether there was a national screening programme for children with attention disorders and whether there were a sufficient number of recreational facilities and playgrounds.

32. The CHAIRPERSON asked whether teachers were adequately paid in comparison with the rest of the civil service, what measures were taken to improve their skills, which according to the report (para. 222) were relatively weak, whether legal assistance was available, in particular for recovery of maintenance, and whether studies had been conducted on the problem of street children and possible measures to correct it.

33. Ms. OUEDRAOGO asked what measures were being taken to combat alcoholism and drug addiction among teenagers.

34. Ms. PALME asked whether the Government attached much importance to sport, which in her opinion provided distraction from violence and an excellent means for young people to develop their personalities.

35. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize) said that the schools emphasized physical education and sports, especially football and basketball, in particular at the primary school level.

36. There was a legal aid centre, which was run by the bar association but which unfortunately had extremely limited resources at its disposal. In 95 per cent of cases involving young offenders, the young person did not have access to the services of a lawyer.

37. Likewise, people could rarely afford to hire a lawyer where recovery of maintenance was concerned. It should be noted, however, that the children's courts had various means of ensuring recovery of maintenance and could at times order the seizure of the assets of a person owing maintenance.

38. The Government would take into account the Committee's comments regarding the raising of the age of criminal liability. It agreed to set the age of conscription into the armed forces at 18 rather than 16. She noted that the Belizean army, which comprised only 1,200 members, was a strictly volunteer army as yet. To the delegation's knowledge no Belizean youth had ever joined the armed services of a neighbouring country.

39. The problem of the traffic in children and sexual tourism did not arise in Belize.

40. Regarding the administration of juvenile justice, the Government was well aware of the fact that much remained to be done in order to bring Belizean legislation into conformity with the Convention. It badly needed technical assistance in order to do so. It would appreciate assistance from experts with a sound knowledge of the country and its laws in preparing all the necessary reforms.

41. Young offenders under 16 years of age being held in police stations were never kept in the same area as older offenders. The Government would be extending that rule to young people from 16 to 18 years of age, as incidents had occurred where young people in police custody had been ill-treated by older detainees.

42. Parents were entitled to be present when their children were questioned by the police. Police officers who did not respect that right were liable to administrative sanctions.

43. Young detainees were entitled to vocational training, psycho-sociological assistance and assistance for reinsertion on leaving prison, in particular through apprenticeship contracts.

44. Regarding freedom of religion, parents who sent their children to denominational schools were entitled to request that the children not attend religious instruction classes.

45. The Government would take all the necessary measures, within its budgetary limitations, to see that Belize ratified ILO Convention No. 138 as soon as possible.

46. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) acknowledged that there had been serious violations of the fundamental rights of migrant workers in the "banana belt". Their situation was improving, thanks to trade-union activism and national and international reactions. One of the achievements on which the new Government could pride itself was the integration of migrant workers' children into the school system. With assistance from a private school-canteen association - as it lacked the necessary resources - the Government was endeavouring to help the primary schools establish school meal programmes in the poorest neighbourhoods, where children had learning difficulties simply because they went to school on an empty stomach.

47. Mr. DAKERS noted that the data in the report were already five or six years old. In the interim, the Government of Belize had undertaken a very ambitious primary education project in cooperation with the World Bank. More and more teachers were being trained, not only at the primary but also at the secondary level. The situation was not therefore as bleak as Mr. Fulci might think. Regarding cooperation with international partners, referred to by Ms. Sardenberg, he pointed out that the school-canteen association referred to by Ms. Balderamos García had been founded by the wife of the British High Commissioner at the time. It had since become a full-fledged non-governmental organization. The British High Commission Office, through the Voluntary Services Overseas Programme, was providing assistance in prison reform and alternatives to detention measures. An international conference of experts on reforming the juvenile justice system was being planned in Belize. It was

hoped that the conference would find solutions to the problem of overcrowding in prisons and the excessively high number of young people who had served time in a penal institution.

48. Regarding the steps being taken to guarantee the right to education, it should be noted that the budgetary allocation for education had always been the highest one in the social sector, even in times of economic crisis. Innovative measures had been taken to make the best use of school facilities by adjusting schedules to allow as many children as possible to attend school despite the lack of classrooms and teachers. Schools were grouped in such a way as to enable three or four neighbouring communities to pool their resources. In some cases that generated transport costs, but the quality of education was much higher. In addition, as the best teachers tended to prefer working in the city rather than in the countryside, the Government had established a system of incentives (improved staff housing, transport facilities) to make the rural areas more attractive.

49. The members of the Committee had made repeated references to "street children" in their comments. In Belize that term meant children who roamed the streets during the day instead of going to school but all of whom went home at nightfall. No children in Belize slept in the street at night. The children in question were neglected by their parents or the adults who had custody of them because the latter worked or were incapable of caring for them. As they all had a home, they could not be regarded as "street children".

50. There were mechanisms at all levels of the education system in Belize for involving children in decision-making, such as student councils. Regarding their involvement in decision-making within the family, he noted that Belize was a multicultural society and that the degree of involvement in decision-making was largely a function of the cultural standards of the ethnic group in question. Studies had shown that the level of interaction and the mode of decision-making in each ethnic group often reflected the particular traditions of the group concerned. It was therefore impossible to generalize, especially as the principal ethnic groups were far from homogeneous themselves.

51. Disabled children and parents' attitudes towards them was admittedly an area in which much remained to be done. The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons had given rise to many events in Belize, but that had not had a significant impact on parents' behaviour. With the help of a few NGOs the Government was working to bring about a change in attitudes and to train better-qualified staff. Efforts were being made to shed the old system, which had aimed at integrating children into the community through placement in institutions. Solid achievements had been made in early detection and evaluation of disabilities. However, less than 50 per cent of disabled persons currently had access to specialized services. Thus coverage needed to be expanded, and the only way to do so was by improving the working conditions of health professionals. There was a Special Education Unit within the Ministry of Education, which worked closely with the Disability Services Division of the Ministry of Human Development. The Unit included specially-trained itinerant teachers who gave classes to disabled children in both urban and rural areas. Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Education,

there were unfortunately far too few of them. In the districts, some teachers already working in a school received special training to help children with specific difficulties.

52. It might be said that boys were currently favoured where recreation was concerned, especially in the area of sports (football and basketball). The Ministry of Women's Affairs was working to develop better-structured programmes for girls. Paradoxically, Belize had been famous for its women's softball teams in the 1950s and 1960s.

53. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that prevention of accidents, in particular road traffic accidents which were a leading cause of death for young people, was one of the Government's main concerns. Orders had been issued making it mandatory for motorcyclists to wear helmets (as unbelievable as it might seem, that had not previously been the case). Action to combat AIDS, which was extremely difficult to implement, had made it necessary to establish a national plan of action and design an actual strategy. A task force already in operation had broadcast radio spot announcements encouraging young people to protect themselves and to avoid promiscuity. However, a comprehensive approach involving both the Government and society at large was needed to cope with the problem. The Government, for its part, had the political will to make further progress.

54. Mr. FULCI congratulated the delegation of Belize on its clear and frank replies, as quality of information rather than quantity was what counted. He recommended that the Government concentrate on children's health and education: in doing so, it would be acting in the best interests not only of the child, but also of the country, whose most precious asset was its children.

55. The CHAIRPERSON, summarizing the Committee members' comments on the report under review, said she hoped that the installation of a new Government would mean hope and progress for the children of Belize. Fresh ideas at the national level, together with ideas and recommendations from the Committee, could not fail to be beneficial for Belizean children. The Committee hoped that the commitments made by the delegation of Belize in the meeting room would be all kept; it welcomed the fact that the members of the delegation had included a minister. Of course, it did not expect all the commitments to be carried out simultaneously, and it was aware of the need for the Government to establish priorities. That having been said, children must be the central concern in the short, medium and long terms.

56. As the members of the Committee had repeatedly stated, reporting should not be regarded as a purely bureaucratic exercise. The delegation should bear in mind that reporting was a continuous process and that it would be returning in five years to explain how the Committee's recommendations had been implemented.

57. The Committee was pleased to learn that the Government intended to embark on legislative reforms to fulfil its obligations under the Convention. Some members had felt that Belize should ratify some of the more important human rights instruments which had a direct impact on respect for the rights of the child. Others had cited the multiplicity of national mechanisms and

the need for coordination among them, in particular the introduction of mediators to help process children's complaints and concerns. In-service training should also be provided for specialists working for and with children.

58. Further study should be given to data collection, which was the means for identifying and defining problems and resolving them successfully.

59. The Committee could never repeat enough that the age of criminal liability and the age of marriage, in particular, were too low in Belize.

60. Greater attention should be paid to the general principles of the Convention, in particular the question of the best interests of the child. Although Belizean children appeared to be well informed of their right to participate, which they did at certain levels, they should be able to do so in their homes, cultural traditions notwithstanding.

61. It had been pointed out that there was a great temptation to believe that the inclusion of civil rights and fundamental freedoms in the Constitution meant that children enjoyed them automatically. That was not the case, and the situation of children with regard to rights and freedoms specifically needed to be examined.

62. Concerning family environment and alternative care, the Committee had been particularly concerned with adoption, especially international adoption, the situation with regard to informal adoption and their consequences for children in such situations, in particular children whose mothers had emigrated and left them in the care of close relatives or society at large. Regarding registration of births, the Government might consider establishing a body of itinerant registrars, as it had done for teachers, in order to reduce the number of newborns who as adults would not be entitled to the services which everyone should have.

63. There could not be free compulsory education at the elementary level if everyone did not have access to it. Without changing the current programme, the Government might improve certain aspects such as the supply of textbooks. It was also very important for children to be able to relax and not spend their free time doing chores.

64. Regarding sexual abuse and drug addiction, she regretted that the delegation had simply repeated the information contained in the report and had not added anything new. The Committee was therefore no closer to an understanding of those particular subjects.

65. On behalf of the members, she encouraged the new Government of Belize to continue its good work, which she was confident would improve the lot of Belizean children in the years to come.

66. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that the members of the Government of Belize did not consider themselves to be experts. They had undertaken action to implement the Convention and had the political will to make every effort to fulfil that task. Although much had already been accomplished, they realized that much more would have to be done, and they thanked the Committee for the interest it had shown, through its incisive and stimulating questions, in efforts to improve the situation of Belizean children.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.